

## Whitney Biennial review – quiet works triumph over noise and obsession

In the New York museum's survey of American art the sharpest pieces reflect on today

Ariella Budick 4/26/2022

---

The current edition of the Whitney Biennial (the 80th!) arrives a year behind schedule, thanks to the pandemic, and cloven in two, like America's body politic. One floor is a hushed, dim maze, the other is airy and radiant, and viewers can choose whether to move from darkness into light or vice versa, depending on their optimism level. I started in the bright regions, but felt more at home in the velvety labyrinth, which is divided into little rooms glowing with illuminated screens and spotlit sculptures.

That's where Guadalupe Rosales's photos of Los Angeles whisper from the walls. We have seen this version of the city before — blurred, nocturnal shots of alleys and backyard fences suffused by bilious or ghostly light — but the pictures' noir sensibility suits the occasion. Rosales's cityscapes are portraits of social divisions, stretches of deserted turf haunted by murder and neglect. In a show brimming with works that clamour for attention, these quiet pictures beckon.

The biennial is always a festival of fragmentation, and that can be a good thing. Curators rake through a vast variety of visual imaginations and gather the harvest into a museum-sized basket, letting those separate grains coexist. The result is often a mess, sometimes a glorious one, where each viewer can hope to find just the right balm for a particular affliction.

Some eyes might alight on a busy and bright profusion of abstract paintings by the choreographer Ralph Lemon, dense with squares, squiggles, and blots, like a scan of a whole neighbourhood's worth of interior lives. Others might stop on Mónica Arreola's photos of unfinished housing in a bleak Mexican landscape, a composite portrait of corruption, waste and abandoned dreams.



Untitled (2018) by Mónica Arreola

During the past three years, many of us have retreated ever farther into a nested series of locked drawers: home, heritage, faction, news source and social media feed, each category segmenting society into finer and more brittle shards. At the same time, we have all lived through the same inescapable, seismic events. In disorienting, destabilising times like these some of us turn to art, not necessarily for coherence or succour but for a guide in focusing thoughts and emotions. We look for something deeper than a clip, more meditative than a sound bite, more touching than a tweet. We hope to see the world's confusion refracted in a way that makes us want to keep looking, rather than turn away in despair.

All that is a tall order for any single work and taller still for a collection of disparate contributions. Even so, this biennial, organised by David Breslin and Adrienne Edwards, disappoints because it amplifies noise, exacerbates fragmentation and indulges obsessions.

One of the more labour-intensive and striking installations, almost awesome in its attempt to organise randomness and resistance, is Rose Salane's "64,000 Attempts at Circulation" (2021). To make it, Salane assembled and sorted a trove of fake and foreign coins, washers, arcade tokens and assorted other discs that passengers jammed into the fare collection boxes of New York buses. Yes, this collection of pocket litter contains a microcosm of the city's disparate lives, but she's gone to an awful lot of trouble to make an obvious point.

And yet if you listen through all the hubbub, a few works do speak with clarity and eloquence. One is the video "Your Eyes Will Be an Empty Word", in which Coco Fusco makes a solitary rowing boat circumnavigation of Hart Island, a virtually unreachable patch of gloom bobbing just off the Bronx. That's where New York goes to bury its glummem memories and poorest residents, the anonymous victims of every pestilence to sweep through the city. In the spring of 2020, when hospitals, morgues, and funeral homes were overwhelmed, thousands of bodies were serried in trenches, joining a city of a million ghosts. "What our minds cannot fathom, the city will immure," Fusco writes.



Alia Farid's 'Palm Orchard'

As Fusco rows to and around the island, tossing flowers on the water, she is tracked by a drone-mounted camera and accompanied by soft droning music by Pauline Kim Harris. The poet and performance artist Pamela Sneed narrates this mini-odyssey (though the text is Fusco's), meditating on the disjunction between private loss and daily statistics. "Concentrations of the dead turn bodies into numbers. They were penniless, they were foreign, they were banished, they were outcast, they were miscreant, they were afflicted, they were unwanted or they were simply unbefriended."

Throughout the pandemic, Fusco moved slowly towards a final form. "I studied classical paintings about plagues, colonial accounts, early modern woodcuts, 19th-century cartoons, medical illustrations, turn-of-the-century advertisements for quack remedies and photographs of 20th-century epidemics," she writes in the catalogue. In the end, she distilled something pure and intimate from all that vast accretion of history (plus the more recent, ceaseless shower of charts, bullet points, prognostications, regulations, violations and reversals).

Her private ritual accomplishes in a dozen minutes of video what a permanent monument might never manage: make memory vivid, specific and resonant. The work's title comes from a poem by Cesare Pavese, which Fusco folds into her text: "For each of us, death has a face./When death comes, it will have your eyes." Her piece lives at that juncture of universal fate and individual confrontation, the worldwide crackling of a billion separate shocks. It's about death, but also about the politics of death, the inequalities that persist to each victim's final breath — and beyond. Pared down and slow, "Your Eyes" nevertheless encapsulates the experience of the pandemic and its aftermath more powerfully than the whole rest of the exhibition put together.

Another work that both anchors and buoys this drifting biennial is "06.01.2020 18.39," by the Chilean-born Alfredo Jaar. The video records — and dramatises — the experience of participating in a Black Lives Matter protest in Washington, DC. Viewers enter a black box, a few at a time, and the door is closed behind them; they are in effect, corralled into a confined space, a reminder of the way riot police kettled protesters in the streets. Chanting figures march in black-and-white footage across the screen, until flash-bangs explode — just you try not to crouch, gasp and sweat. Soon, the menacing snarl of police choppers grows loud, then deafening, and wind machines mounted in the ceiling simulate the downdraft of their whirring blades.

The effect is almost panic-inducing. “I thought about my own experience in Pinochet’s Chile,” Jaar recalls. “That is when I realised that I was witnessing fascism. Fascism had arrived in the USA.” Whether or not you agree with that assessment, he makes it impossible to remain apart from the era’s conflicts and sends its constant sense of crisis shuddering through sinew and bone. You want political art that makes you feel? this piece demands; here’s what politics feels like.